

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNDERGRADUATE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 07 December 2012

Present: Dr R Wells (Convener), Dr P Bishop, Miss J Bjorkqvist, Dr P Davidson, Mr P Fantom, Dr A Jenkinson, Dr M Law, Professor A Lumsden, Dr G Mackintosh, Dr W D McCausland, Dr J McDonald, Mr G Maloney, Dr R Millar, Dr J Perkins, Dr A Teti (Items 1 – 3), Miss E Webb (Clerk)

Apologies: Mr D Auchie, Mrs C Baverstock, Mrs J Bruce, Ms K Christie, Dr S Davies, Miss M Dunn, Professor R Evans-Jones, Dr A Hartley, Professor P McGeorge, Dr G McEwan, Dr R Patey, Ms R Sandison, Dr R Vij, Dr D Wood

MINUTES

(Copy filed as UG/071212/001)

- 1.1 The Committee approved the minute of the meeting held on 8th October 2012, subject to Item 2.9 being amended.

Action: Clerk

Clerks Note: Item 2.9 is to be amended as follows;

2.9 The Committee discussed the various options of addressing 6 week courses. The 6 week courses continued to cause concern, however, recommendations were made, and the Committee agreed that although the situation was problematic it was possible for it to be addressed.

ANNUAL REPORT ON THE IDENTIFICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF GOOD PRACTICE IN LEARNING AND TEACHING

(Copy filed as UG/07122012/02)

- 2.1 The Committee were asked to consider how best to utilise various methods to disseminate the information contained in the report.
- 2.2 The Committee commented that the Annual Teaching and Learning Symposium is the main platform where this information is disseminated. However, the Committee raised concerns that it is often the same people who attend the Symposium, therefore restricting the dissemination of information.. Members of the Committee, who have attended the Symposium, commented on how useful and interesting it is.
- 2.3 In order to raise awareness of the Symposium, the Committee recommended that the School Teaching and Learning Committees raise awareness of the event, encouraging their staff to attend. It was suggested that encouragement from staff rather than the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) may be more effective, with a particular emphasis on Heads of School encouraging their staff to attend. Furthermore, it was suggested that those who have previously attended the event should be emailed and asked to "bring a friend". It was noted that a personal invite from a member of staff who had themselves attended previously was more likely to draw attention to the event and encourage staff to attend, rather than a generic email.

Action: Dr Joy Perkins, CLT

Clerks note:

Dr Perkins confirmed that staff would receive an email during the week of 17th December regarding “bringing a friend” to the Symposium.

- 2.4 The Committee noted the large number of new staff starting in January 2013 and suggested information on the Symposium should be included as part of their Induction Pack.

Action: Clerk

Clerks note:

The Centre for Learning and Teaching, hereafter referred to as CLT, have confirmed that the College Directors of Teaching and Learning are involved in a two day course, “Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at the University of Aberdeen” and will have the opportunity to highlight the course at a College Level and with the new members of staff. They will also be able to advertise the Annual Teaching and Learning Symposium at this event.

Furthermore, CLT confirmed that those who attended the September version of the above course are informed about the Symposium at that point in time, and asked to keep the date clear in their diaries.

- 2.5 The Committee raised concern about the information available on the University's webpages. Although there may be information available, the Committee noted that it appears in various places where it is perhaps not easily accessible. It was suggested that there were direct links made available from individual School sites to information on good practice in learning and teaching, such as links to the report, and The CLT webpage. The Committee were also reminded of the development of StaffNet and it was suggested there may be an area for staff dedicated to Learning and Teaching with the ability to highlight and advertise certain information.

Evaluation of the Impact of Curriculum Reform (CRef)

(Copy filed as UG/07122012/04)

- 3.1 The Committee were asked to consider any further requirements which may be required to evaluate the impact of CRef, as the implementation period comes to an end.
- 3.2 Although Sixth Century Courses and Sustained Study courses are evaluated in Student Course Evaluation Forms (SCEF), Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) and External Examiner reports, and the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) is engaged in a longitudinal study of the embedding of Graduate Attributes, it is realised that the holistic impact of CRef must be evaluated.
- 3.3 The Committee were strongly of the opinion that it would be vital for Adviser's of Study and Programme Co-ordinators to be able to contribute to any review of CRef, with a possible collation of opinion on a School level.
- 3.4 The Committee also agreed that it was vital the student body was questioned on their experience of CRef.

- 3.5 It was suggested that specific CRef related questions were added to the Institutional Student Survey (ISS) and possibly on SCEFs and that Student Focus Groups were formed.
- 3.6 However, the Committee agreed that there would be a vast depth of opinion across a large number of people and that a potential problem could arise in attempting to measure and quantify the information gathered.
- 3.7 The Committee also raised concerns regarding how and what students would be asked. The Committee noted the importance of ensuring any questions asked have the purpose of measuring what the University wanted CRef to achieve, for example an increase in employability, rather than assessing if an individual enjoyed a particular course.
- 3.8 The Committee noted that it may be difficult to assess the impact of CRef immediately and, therefore, the plan implemented to assess CRef should have a long term action plan, enabling the long term outcomes of CRef to be assessed.
- 3.9 The Committee suggested that it would be important to have a form of evaluation which would allow any constructive criticism of the system to be considered and solutions to help improve CRef to be implemented.
- 3.10 The Committee recommended that that the Curriculum Commission be evaluated and reviewed against the implementation of CRef.
- 3.11 The Committee agreed that it was important that the pedagogical successes of CRef should be measured and that teaching and learning should be the focus of any review and evaluation.

ANONYMOUS MARKING

(Copy filed as UG/07122012/04)

- 4.1 Gordon Maloney, Student Association President for Welfare and Equal Opportunity introduced the paper and provided background information to the Committee. The Committee were asked to discuss the paper.
- 4.2 The Committee were informed that anonymous marking is approved by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the National Union of Students (NUS), and that whilst Aberdeen uses anonymous marking to guard against prejudice in exams, there also needs to be a perception that all work is marked fairly. Mr Maloney appreciated that there are limitations and boundaries, but invited the Committee to discuss methods of extending anonymous marking at Aberdeen.
- 4.3 The Committee asked whether there was the possibility of using TurnitinUK to mark continuous assessment anonymously. It was confirmed that it was possible to submit to TurnitinUK using ID number rather than name.
- 4.4 It was suggested that the cover sheet used in exams could be rolled out for use when course work is submitted. However the Committee did note concerns about problems that arise when attempting to identify pieces of work when the cover sheets are not filled in correctly.

- 4.5 The Committee noted the difficulty of implementing anonymous marking in very small classes without bringing in an external marker. The Committee noted that this may not always be possible for marking pieces of continuous assessment.
- 4.6 It was realised that different College's could face different issues in extending anonymous marking. The Committee suggested that each College look at their own practices, and identify where there are currently problems and where problems may lie in rolling out anonymous marking. The Colleges could then issue guidance to Schools on their anonymous marking policy.

Action: Clerk

ALTERNATIVE FORMS AND TIMING OF ASSESSMENTS

(UG/07122012/05)

- 5.1 Following the approval by Senate to implement changes to the Academic Year, it was noted that now would be an appropriate time for the Committee to discuss the issue of timing and alternative forms of assessment. The Committee was invited to discuss the issue of timing and alternative forms of assessment.
- 5.2 The Committee were informed that although formative and continuous assessment is becoming more common, some students are still faced with 100% exams in many subjects, but yet have the increased workload of formative assessment. Whilst students agree that formative assessment is a useful method to help students with their studies, when students have to spend a large amount of time preparing formative assessment, which is never turned into continuous assessment, it places a large amount of stress on the student, when preparing for a 100% exam.
- 5.3 Members of the Committee noted concern about courses becoming 100% assessed by way of continuous assessment and suggested that if assessment was to be completed before the end of 12 weeks of teaching, students may fail to attend the teaching following completion of the assessment.
- 5.4 The Committee questioned whether continuous assessment could be scheduled within timetabled teaching. The response was that this was possible if desired by the course co-ordinator. However, it was noted that where there are very large classes this may be problematic, for example in terms of ensuring the entire class is present at once.
- 5.5. The discussion progressed to the question of exemption exams and whether at levels 1 and 2, could good performance in continuous assessment exempt students from the final exam. The Committee discussed whether exemption from the final exam should be a choice for the student, a solution thought to be favourable with students.
- 5.6 The Committee agreed that while this was a good principle, however it would need to be ensured that no student was advantaged or disadvantaged by the choice of assessment they made. The Committee were also concerned about students attendance dropping off towards the end of teaching if they had been informed they were exempt from the final exam.
- 5.7 The Committee considered that a shift towards exemption from exams would be a positive for staff, freeing up time for staff to concentrate on other areas, as there would be a decrease in their marking load.. However, it was noted that this may involve a shift in work load of Teaching Assistants, and therefore there may be a financial implication associated with any change.

- 5.8 The Committee asked whether exams had to be sat within the exam diet. The Committee were informed that this was not the case, however, exam results must still be returned by the deadline associated with that particular exam diet. Therefore if a course was 7 weeks in length, the exam could be scheduled for week 9 of teaching.
- 5.9 It was also noted that exams do not need to be subject specific and courses may be coded as full year courses to allow teaching in one half session with the second half session free for writing up, research or field work associated with the course. This would allow students to prepare for an examination which could be scheduled in the May exam diet.
- 5.10 The Committee thought that there is probably myth amongst academics that there must be an end of assessment exam. It was felt that it might be beneficial for University Staff to be educated on alternative forms of assessment.

Action: Clerk

Clerk's note:

CLT confirmed that they run open workshops on a range of assessment techniques. For information on forthcoming event please visit <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/clt/> .

CLT also confirmed that a specific workshop on alternative assessment techniques was run for Sixth Century course co-ordinators as part of CREF based on the list of assessments in the paper *UG/07122012/05*.

- 5.11 The Committee noted concern about a diversity of assessment that might develop and sought assurances that this was acceptable. The Committee were informed that it might actually benefit students allowing them to choose different courses with different forms of assessment, as this would allow students to manage their time more effectively, and a choice in assessment may help students achieve better results.
- 5.12 Whilst the Committee agreed that diversity and choice for students in assessment was important and a positive, the Committee agreed that it was vital that what equated to 15 credits in an assessment was standardised throughout the curriculum to ensure equality.

ERASMUS

(Oral Update)

- 6.1 The Committee was asked to consider the feasibility of students undertaking an ERASMUS year in their 3rd year.
- 6.2 Many other Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) send their students on ERASMUS during their 3rd year, and there has been an increase in partner institutions only accepting students at Level 3. The Committee were informed that the University would like to find a balance between the numbers of outgoing students to incoming students. Currently there are around 500 incoming students, with only 150 outgoing.

- 6.3 The issues surrounding sending students at Level 2 were explained to the Committee. It was highlighted that for a student to arrange an ERASMUS exchange for Level 2, the decision must be taken very early on in the students 1st year. This is already a busy and at times stressful period for new students, who are occupied with concentrating on settling into University life. For many it is difficult to make the decision to take a year abroad so early into their studies. This also causes problems for Academics attempting to give references for students, as they do not know the student particularly well at this point, and the students may not yet have any exam results to provide an academic judgement. It was suggested that the deadline for applying for ERASMUS should be extended to give students and staff more time to complete the application process.
- 6.4 The Committee raised concerns regarding how a student's 3rd year would be classified towards their Honours Degree if they were abroad during that period. The Committee questioned if the University could be satisfied about the quality of the teaching they were receiving at this level.
- 6.5 The Committee was informed that there would be a decrease in the number of partner institutions that the University currently has, that would allow for the partnerships to be carefully evaluated to ensure that the quality of education matched what students would receive from at Aberdeen. By having fewer partnerships it would be possible to create better working relationships, which may help resolve problems surrounding Level 3 study. Additionally, the Committee were informed that there would be an increase in partnerships offering teaching in English. It was noted that several Scandinavian Universities have changed to teaching in English, allowing their league table rankings to increase. Again, this may quell fears over the quality of teaching our outgoing students are receiving, as well as increase the number of students able to take an ERASMUS year, as the language barrier is removed.
- 6.6 It was also noted that as more students participate in CRef, there will be a further increase in the number of students taking languages through sustained study, therefore opening up further opportunities to participate in an ERASMUS year.
- 6.7 The Committee asked if there was a database for students and staff to look at previous exchanges to see where students had had positive experiences, to help encourage other students to go. The Committee were reminded about the ERASMUS Association. It was also suggested that all students taking part in ERASMUS should also complete a questionnaire which may help rank the experiences, and again provide more information for students.
- 6.8 The Committee were informed of issues where the University's regulations strictly prevent any form of placement or exchange at Level 3, particularly in the School of Engineering. It was further noted, however, that placements or exchanges do currently work well at Level 2 and 4.
- 6.9 It was noted that the change to the Academic Year may increase the opportunity for students to go abroad, with the exam diet finishing before Christmas. It means students are completely free to leave for the start of a new session elsewhere.
- 6.10 The Committee noted changes in the ERASMUS unit moving to SRAS to sit with the International Exchange Programme (IEP) and were ensured that although there will be a change in structure, the financial support will remain to allow ERASMUS to continue.